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Social Security Administration Changes Official Terminology from “Mental Retardation” to “Intellectual Disability”

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In a final rule published in the Federal Register on August 1, the Social Security Administration (SSA) announced that it will abandon the use of the term “mental retardation” and adopt the term “intellectual disability” in its Listing of Impairments used to evaluate claims involving mental disorders in adults and children and in other appropriate sections of its rules.

The change in language adopts the term that Congress unanimously agreed to in October 2010 when it passed Rosa’s Law. The law stripped from federal health, education and labor policy reference to “mental retardation” and “mentally retarded” and replaced these terms with “Intellectual disability” and “individual with an intellectual disability”. The law was named for Rosa Marcellino, a Maryland girl with Down syndrome.

Although SSA was not part of the mandate in Rosa’s Law, its new regulation acknowledges the negative connotations and misunderstandings about the nature of the disorder, and recognizes the importance that such a name change can have on public understanding.

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